

# The future of the Eastern Partnership: Strategic change or continued drifting

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**If the EU is unsuccessful in a region where it has significant interests, what can realistically be expected from it on a global level? asks Tamás Novák.**

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A more [detailed version](#) of this text is available on the website of the Austrian Society for European Politics (ÖGfE – Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik).

Prior to the Vilnius Summit in 2013, Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy at that time, said that the Vilnius summit would “open a new chapter” in the EU’s relations with its Eastern partners.

She was right, but most probably she was anticipating a different kind of change. Independently of the causes behind the current difficulties in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) region, the EU is facing a fundamental dilemma. If at this point it wants to make an impact and at the same time preserve its attractiveness for third countries, strategic decisions have to be taken. Although the soft power (or transformative leverage) of the EU had worked in Central Europe and achieved some results in the Western Balkans it still remains low-key in Eastern Europe. Currently the major directions of strategic changes regarding the future of the EaP are unpredictable.

Russia, a strong regional power with large soft and hard powers has been watching the possible geopolitical gains of the European Union with growing concern. From the Russian perspective it was the European Union that revived geopolitics in CEE by launching the Eastern Partnership – after successfully incorporating several Central European countries into the North Atlantic economic and security institutions. The perception of the “weak and declining” Russia, which definitely had dominated the thinking of EU policy makers (and US analysts too) prior to the 2013 Vilnius Summit, did not seriously reckon with the possibility of a change in Russia’s attitude towards the West. But the more precise interpretation is that the Russian stance has not changed in comparison to previous years, but the EU exceeded the tolerance level of Russia.

The EU is the only external power that is expected to manage and influence the affairs in EaP countries including the crisis in Ukraine (with the supportive policy of the US of course) besides Russia. The future of the EaP and the ability of the EU to influence the developments therein becomes a very important test for the CFSP. If the EU is unsuccessful in a region where it may have significant interest, what can realistically be expected from it on a global level? What can be the final objective, the strategic approach of the Eastern Partnership from the EU’s perspective? Using international relations (IR) and political economic theories and analyses, three major options can be identified.

### **Options**

The first alternative sets EU membership of the EaP countries as the final objective of the initiative. EU enlargement (and the redefinition of NATO strategy) would without doubt express the value based approach according to which it is much better to live under democratic rules and guarantying these values than under the rule of an autocratic and corrupt elite strongly connected to the Russian leadership. In pursuing this objective the EU should do everything in order to support the democratic transformation and economic restructuring in the countries which really want to become members of the EU.

The second option would openly admit that the EU is unable and in fact does not want to be engaged more deeply in the affairs of the Eastern Partnership countries and in the Ukraine conflict and would rather seek to make an agreement with Russia. It would also suggest that having relatively good relations with Russia is more important than relations with neighbouring EaP countries. This approach de facto accepts the current situation and confirms the division of Ukraine and EaP countries between pro-western and pro- Russian countries/regions. Instead of a confrontational policy against Russia, which requires economic sacrifices and diplomatic pressure, this policy would result in economic and political advantages. Maintaining buffer zones between the EU and Russia would be beneficial for the EU and Russia since it would not cost much and less effort would be required from the EU.

The third option is the continuation of the indefinite, vague and drifting policies towards the region underpinned by the large diversity of the countries in question. The paralysed “no change” strategy can be justified by the numerous challenges facing the EU – in addition to Russia – such as

Grexit/Brexit, growth problems, difficulties with TTIP negotiations, and Euroscepticism, etc. In this case the EU would emphasize the responsibility of individual EaP countries and would offer some vaguely defined support for countries that decide in favour of the European perspective. The outcome of this option would be similar to the second one but in this case the EU would silently give up the entire EaP region due to its inability to create a common policy, which wins the support of every member state. If the EU opts for this alternative, it will only reinforce the perception of it being weak in the face of Russia.

## **Conclusion**

If the EU is not unified in maintaining a strongly supported common foreign policy towards the region and it is unable to offer EU membership perspectives to a country like Ukraine, the risk of disappointment of the pro-western population and political elite will likely be on the rise. The signs for “realpolitik” are strong, in which case the moral or ethical premises and ideological notions of a value and principle based EU can easily perish. This option should be avoided at any cost since it would create an environment where Western values and their future attractiveness can be questioned which will finally lead to the definitive elimination of the remnants of the EU’s soft power.

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